

Don't Turn Away

Agencies that help foster children should quit doing so in isolation

By **CARLOS R. MORENO**

The state of California supports nearly 80,000 foster children, each of whom comes before our dependency courts numerous times as his or her case progresses through the system.

It is no surprise that judges hear a lot of stories about trauma and separation, many of them heartbreaking tales of missed opportunities and lack of support from government agencies charged with helping these youths.

What is surprising is how many different agencies are involved with the same families -- and how infrequently they work together.

The system spans multiple problems and multiple agencies. When we fail to coordinate services and support, it is the children and families who suffer -- and the agencies that shoulder the expense of duplicated efforts. Yet fragmented services appear to be the norm. To cite just a few examples:

Severing Support

In California, youths who move from foster care into probation lose their child-welfare support and services. These young people still need help, perhaps more so than before.

Children who are removed from their parents are often separated from siblings, friends and schools in addition to the trauma and neglect that caused their foster-care placement in the first place. A recent California foster youth summit on mental health reported that fewer than half of foster children get the psychological help they so desperately need.

The Indian Child Welfare Act, passed in 1978, requires child-welfare agencies to work with tribes to place children in tribal communities. Yet half the Indian children in foster care are placed with non-Indian caregivers. There is little communication between child-welfare agencies, the courts and our state's tribes.

Judicial Overload

California's juvenile courts oversee all children in foster care, but the court system suffers from overload. Dependency court judges carry an average of 1,000 cases at a time. Attorneys, who work most closely with children and families in court, have an average caseload of 270, nearly twice the recommended caseload.

In some of the larger counties, including Riverside, that caseload rises to 600 or more. Regular rotation means juvenile judges usually serve less than three years, making it difficult to build expertise and provide leadership for a system facing so many challenges.

With such concerns in mind, Chief Justice Ronald M. George appointed a California Blue Ribbon Commission on Children in Foster Care in March 2006. He gave us two years to make recommendations to help the courts improve outcomes for foster children and their families.

Among our goals, this commission is determined to break down the barriers between the various agencies and tribes that must work together if we are to help families and children thrive. We came to Riverside County this month for our sixth quarterly meeting to see some promising programs in action.

The Riverside Tribal Alliance brings together Indian and child-welfare leaders in a partnership that focuses on better communication, early intervention and culturally appropriate services for Indian children and families.

Riverside County Superior Court Judge Elisabeth Sichel explained that the alliance had to bridge a "historical backlog of mistrust" in order to tackle issues such as recruiting more Indian foster homes, educating judges and social-services staff, and sharing data and real-time information on the well-being of Indian children.

Riverside is also pioneering an effort to focus on "dual jurisdiction" children who are under the supervision of both the probation and child-welfare systems. In the past, these agencies avoided one another, sometimes not speaking even when their offices were in the same building.

But now they are at the same table, recognizing that, as Riverside County Superior Court Judge Becky Dugan explained, "dual-status kids belong to all of us." Services should follow the child, especially when a foster child enters probation.

We visited the California Institution for Women and heard from incarcerated mothers whose children are in foster care. The Chino institution, in a public-private partnership with the Center for Children of Incarcerated Parents, is pioneering a series of prison-based and transitional programs to teach child development and help mothers bond with children so they can provide stable families when they leave prison.

Research shows that these programs lower recidivism when accompanied by substance-abuse treatment, an advantage for the children and for society.

Riverside County gave us a hopeful glimpse of what a collaborative system of care might look like. We will keep this vision in mind as we prepare our recommendations for spring 2008.

California Supreme Court Justice Carlos R. Moreno is chairman of the California Blue Ribbon Commission on Children in Foster Care. He is also a foster parent.